

Attention and Intention in Tai Chi Chuan

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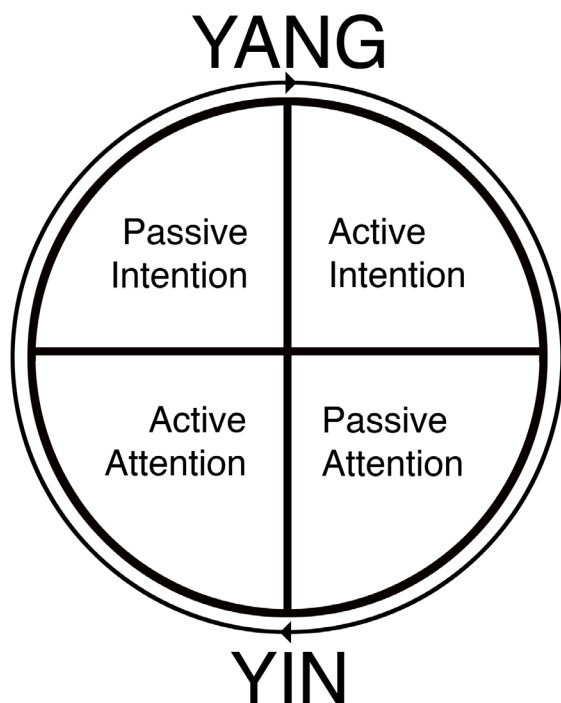
When I took up tai chi chuan early in 1979, I was looking for a substantial exercise to supplant the calisthenics and yoga-like exercises I'd been doing for several years. The fact was, though these exercises kept me buff and strong, they'd grown boring. I wanted something with more dimension—something, to quote Donovan, “to please my mind as well as my time.” I also was interested in something that would impart some self-defense.

This was during the first burgeoning of the modern martial arts in America. Bruce Lee had electrified the screen, the Kung Fu series had invaded our homes, and students were flocking to dojos, kwoons, gyms, and parks to practice some kind of martial art. Tai chi was a popular choice, in large part because its meditative aspects had been fastened on by the New Age movement. A karateka I knew recommended it when I asked his advice about which martial art to take. “It gets better with age,” he told me. As I knew I would only get older, that seemed a reasonable lure, and I began attending classes.

Luckily I did choose tai chi instead of some harder martial art, though I have briefly practiced a couple of harder styles. From my observations over the past nearly forty years, so many of the harder styles engage primarily in simple rote muscle memory—exactly the mindset I was trying to get away from. Tai chi, while it does have that aspect, has exceeded my expectations in being as interesting as it is physically worthwhile. I say, “exceed my expectations,” because tai chi has delivered answers not only to the questions I had, but to questions I didn't know to ask.

So, while I would never say that tai chi is the “best” martial art, I've found that it's the best for me. And the reason for that is that tai chi possesses multifold mental aspects, only some of which are related to the obvious intellectual aspects of tai chi, such as the study of tai chi history, philosophy, precepts, methodology, and so forth, or trying to understand the literalness of the form and its movements. More important to the practice of tai chi are the mental aspects of attention and intention. I didn't know about these when I first started learning tai chi, but I came to a greater understanding of their significance as time went on.

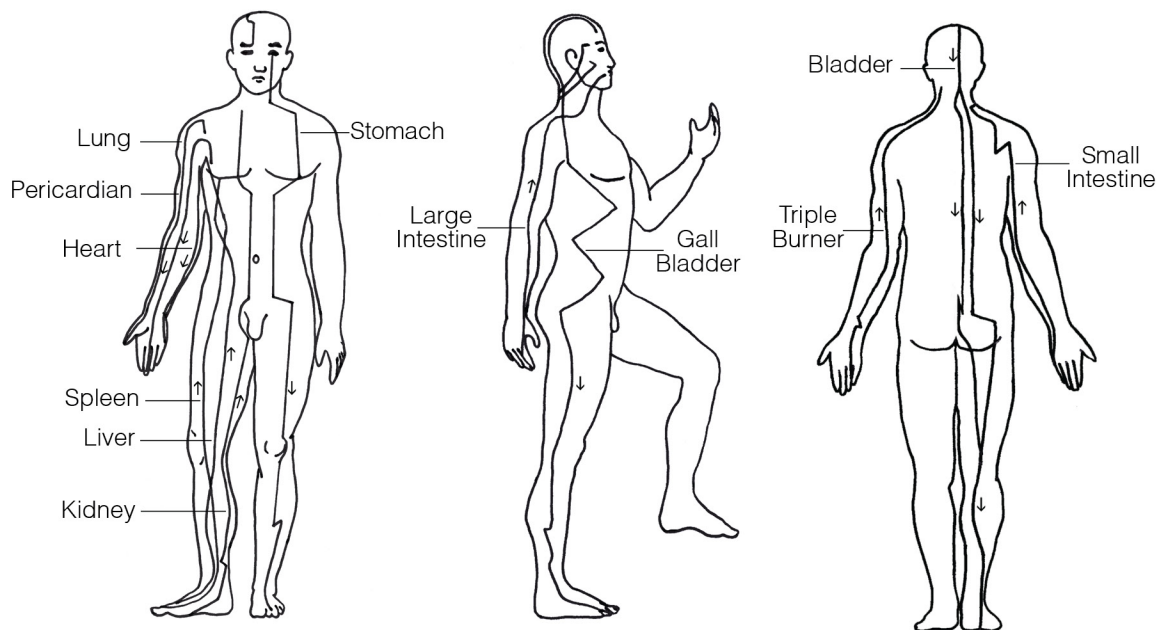
Attention and intention can be considered the yin and yang of the same coin, though each contains a dichotomy of its own. Attention has an active, yang aspect—as when one is listening to some sound—and a passive, yin aspect—as when one happens to catch drifts of sound on the wind. Intention's active, yang aspect, is the deliberate initiation of action—meaning to do something, such as reach out to pick up a glass of water—and its passive, yin aspect, is reaction—non-deliberate, instinctive response.



Note that non-deliberate does not mean or imply non- or unconscious. Mind and awareness are involved in all types of movement, just involved differently. Also, it is important to distinguish mind and attention from thought. Thought is something that goes on within the mind to which the mind frequently pays attention. But it doesn't have to, and flow of thought can, with training, be ignored or suppressed, leaving awareness to observe sensation.

Attention (of both types) is associated with the autonomic, or sensory, nervous system, which transmits information from and about the world (including the state of one's body) to the mind. These nerves regulate yin chi flow within the body, and the chi field surrounding them flows from the extremities back into the central nervous system. In the limbs, the meridians for this inward flow lie within the outsides of the arms and the insides of the legs. (1)

Intention (of both types) is associated with the somatic nervous system, or the part of the nervous system that impels voluntary movement. These nerves regulate yang chi flow within the body, and the chi energy surrounding them flows from the central nervous system toward the extremities. In the limbs, the meridians for this outward flow lie within the insides of the arms and the outsides of the legs.



The Macrocosmic Orbit comprises the twelve major meridians that channel chi from the Microcosmic Orbit, through the torso, and into the limbs. The circuitry for the extremities consists of three meridians that channel chi into each limb and three that carry chi back into the Microcosmic Orbit.

Attention	Intention
Yin	Yang
Sensory input	Dynamic output
Active aspect: focused	Active aspect: deliberate movement
Passive aspect: diffuse	Passive aspect: instinctive movement
Autonomic nervous system	Somatic nervous system
Chi flows inward	Chi flows outward
Outsides of the arms and insides of the legs	Insides of the arms and outsides of the legs

In each case, the yin aspect is simply the state of holding the nerve impulses in abeyance, and the yang aspect is the active sending or receiving of impulses. In all cases, it is the mind that regulates the way these two portions of the nervous system operate and handle the energy naturally flowing through them. The trick in tai chi is to eliminate thought from the process of movement and to use awareness to direct instinctual movement.

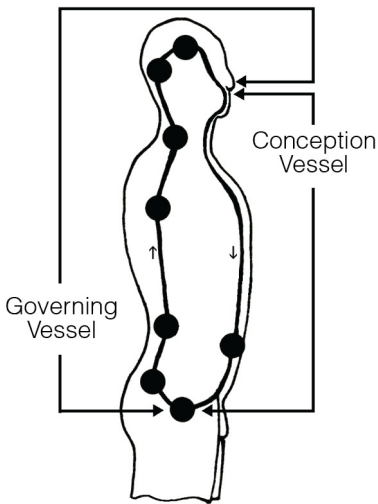
Tai chi trains one to first use passive attention to sense the dynamic energy state that exists between the tai chi chuanist and an opponent. When the opponent moves, the movement is felt on the physical level by the tai chi chuanist's sensory apparatus, which consists of eyes, ears, nose, and skin. It also is felt on an energetic level that includes the chi field that surrounds the tai chi chuanist's body. Information about the movement is then transmitted into his mind along the sensory nerves.

As soon as the dynamic energy state changes, it instantaneously transforms passive attention into active attention within the tai chi chuanist. This is the state of *wu wei*, or non-action, transforming, through action, into the yin/yang dichotomy of mutual interaction. The active attention triggers passive intention, which tends to produce instinctive reaction. But through tai chi's physical and mental training, that instinctive response is controlled and directed rather than haphazard, allowing the tai chi chuanist to use active intention to push a wave of nerve impulses into a specific body part (yang usage) or to suck the energy back into himself (yin usage). Ideally, the resulting movement is of a type that seamlessly blends deliberate, purposeful action with the mindless speed of raw reaction.

When you watch people doing tai chi, it often is possible to distinguish those who can direct an inner force or purpose within the outer movement from those who, however accomplished in the completeness and flow of their forms, simply go through the motions.

Learning tai chi is like creating a vessel—the form—and then learning to fill that vessel with the fluid energy that we call chi. There are other exercises, notably chi kung, that can do the same thing, but tai chi's unique aspect is that it also trains the practitioner to mobilize the chi, both more powerfully through its natural circuits and more specifically into various body parts, in various ways, to lend practical utility to the chi and to the movement. This can be for martial purposes, but exercise and health are natural outcomes, even if one does not desire to engage in martial activity.

The movements of tai chi create physical alignments that are conducive to the propagation of wave energy—both physical and energetic, usually in tandem. One result of correct alignments of muscle, tendon, and bone is the ability to produce martial force. These same alignments also facilitate the production and accumulation of chi in the tantien, and they open up the major joints and muscles to eliminate blockages that inhibit the proper and strong flow of chi. They also give the practitioner, through specific techniques, a greater ability to control the flow of chi through the two major meridians that comprise the Microcosmic Orbit and to direct it into the legs at the sacral plexus and into the arms at the brachial plexus. Active intent is a primary

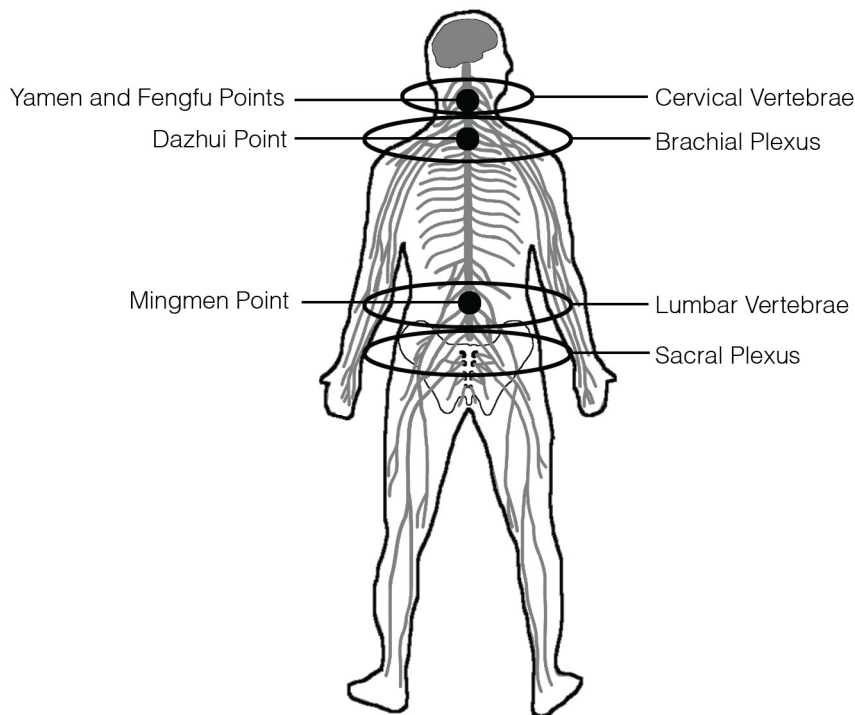


The Microcosmic Orbit consists of the body's two primary chi channels: the Conception Vessel and the Governing Vessel.

motivator of chi mobilization, the other primary motivator being the breathing pattern. Intent is the mental push that propels a pulse or wave of chi energy through the body by sending a mental purpose down appropriate nerves.

Notice that this is not the same as deliberate movement, such as reaching out for a glass of water. In doing that, your mind has a desire or thought and instructs your muscles to act: I want water, it's over there, reach out for it. Movement caused by intention eliminates the step of the mind's deliberation. Instead, passive intent opens a clear pathway to an objective, and active intent immediately generates movement simply by intending it, without the extra steps taken by thought.

The twin concepts of attention and intention are highlighted by two questions: Why do you practice tai chi, and how do you practice? Your reasons for practicing can be very important to the success of your practice. One excellent reason to practice is for health. There are a lot of ideas and stories about the health benefits of tai chi that may or may not be true, and I won't go into them here. But at its least, tai chi is a good, if not total, exercise, and as such, it has beneficial effects on physical health even without attention and intention. It promotes leg strength, stability, relaxation, correct structural alignments,



Important nerve plexus centers, spinal sections, and acupuncture points located along the Governing Vessel. Chi is channeled into the legs at the sacral plexus, and chi is channeled into the arms at the brachial plexus.

flexibility, and body control, among others. All of these are critically important to good health—a claim with which I think almost every tai chi practitioner would agree. The other reasons for practicing tai chi will not so readily reach a consensus. They are self-development (spiritual advancement) and martial effectiveness.

Not always, but quite often, tai chi players will be drawn to the art for one of these reasons or the other, for tai chi contains a good bit of mystique with regards to both aspects. Tai chi has always been billed as the soft and gentle martial art, the meditational martial art, the spiritual martial art. Consequently, it attracts a lot of people who are seeking spiritual advancement or mental and emotional comfort and release. Many of these people practice tai chi almost exclusively for the health, meditational, and self-development aspects, to the exclusion of the martial. When you watch these people practice, the movements are often beautiful and flowing, but sometimes they also seem devoid of content, of meaning. They seem empty, as if the players are waving their arms around in specific patterns without the intent or purpose. It is as if they have created an ornate container that holds nothing.

Tai chi has a meditational, self-development aspect that is very important, but the art was originally developed for its martial utility and as a way to increase and manipulate internal energy. Without intent or purpose, the movements are empty, and if empty, they cannot truly succeed in either their meditational purpose or their ability to enhance health and well-being. Certainly, an empty form cannot possibly magnify, store, propel, and channel internal energy.

Intention, then, is bound up in martial purpose and is inextricably tied to the question of how a particular movement or movements can be used in combat situations. I've met a lot of the exercise and meditational variety of tai chi players, and they all have some vague notion that tai chi is good for self-defense, and many have a belief that tai chi will come to their rescue in a time of crisis. That belief might not be well founded, because these individuals have not practiced tai chi with any sort of martial intent. Consequently, while their movements might basically go the right way, their body alignments and their internal energy aren't doing what they're supposed to do, and so the movements are ineffective for self-defense. Worse, because the alignments and energy channels aren't optimal, the movements are less effective for the meditational and spiritual aspects as well as for the health benefits that tai chi can impart.

My purpose here is not to disparage those who do not care for tai chi's martial aspect. Truthfully, I'm not all that great a martial artist myself. For me, the feeling of the flow of energy is what is important. But I very much like the way tai chi's martial applications help teach in a practical way the lessons of chi mobilization. What I'm getting at is that, as far as I can tell, to make tai chi the truly effective and superior art it can be, the practice of it has to engage meaning that goes beyond the simple physical exercise and beyond the spiritual meditation. The practitioner must accept the intent and method of martial purpose because that is what develops the depth and range of both attention and intention within the practitioner, and those are what are used, to a large extent, to drive and manipulate the chi.

The reality is that to make tai chi truly effective on the emotional and spiritual levels, it must be practiced with intent—as if one is really doing something. You must actually feel as though you are accomplishing a real task—even if you are doing it slowly and gently—and not just waving your arms and floating through the air. A lot of peaceful people who are attracted to tai chi for its positive physical and spiritual qualities are turned off by the violence inherent in practicing tai chi as a martial art, but, unfortunately, they are short-changing themselves by practicing the art as if it is all mystical form and no practical substance.

This doesn't mean that those of you who are not interested in tai chi's martial aspects must become martial artists. But it does mean that you have to learn at least a little bit about the martial purposes so that you can use that as a guide in learning to magnify, store, mobilize, and direct and focus your internal energy. The beauty of

intention is that it is relatively easy to sense and to arouse. And from there, it's possible to delve more deeply into attention.

As you can see, attention and intention may be two sides of the same coin, but that coin can be spent in a number of different ways. As my karateka friend promised, tai chi does get better with age.

(1) See my books, *The Wellspring: An Inquiry into the Nature of Chi* and *Circling the Square: Observations on the Dynamics of Tai Chi Chuan*, for more thorough discussions on the nature, generation, and mobilization of chi.